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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides a brief description of the cultural background of the Vietnamese, the geography of the country of Vietnam, the history of the Vietnamese people, their language, beliefs, systems of values, religions, customs, feasts, and holidays. The kit is designed to provide American sponsors and teachers with meaningful information about the Vietnamese refugees in order to facilitate understanding and better communication. Suggestions are also provided for dealing with problems arising from the cultural differences between Americans and Vietnamese. (Author/CFM)

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ED149602

VIETNAMESE CULTURE KIT

VAN HOA VIET NAM

越南文化

By
Liem Thanh Nguyen

FL009169

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
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VIETNAMESE

CULTURE

KIT

By
Liem Thanh Nguyen

Research Institute For Studies
In
Education

College Of Education

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

1976

P R E F A C E

BILINGUAL EDUCATION INFORMATION SERIES

Teachers in schools throughout the United States have the professional responsibility and personal challenge to appreciate and understand cultural diversity, an inescapable part of American life, in working with children in the schools. All teachers must be fully aware of the important implication of the enriching effect and potential of diverse cultural integrity and contributions of all in all learning. The United States, being a nation of multicultural mosaics, imposes on every professional educator some very special responsibilities relevant to and congruent with implementing democracy as an educational philosophy. These special concerns expect each educator to be able to:

1. Appreciate, acknowledge, and respect every contributing culture to the nation's society,
2. Have an understanding of and competencies for working in multicultural learning situations, and
3. Incorporate the needs, cultural elements, learning styles, and values of diverse cultures in curriculum content, program development, course content, and teaching procedures to be provided all children in the school.

During 1975 many South Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Thaidams relocated in the United States. Their presence added another dimension to the multicultural mosaic of this nation's society. In order to provide a better understanding of the refugee children (Vietnamese, Cambodian, or Thaidam) and their problems, it is helpful to understand the background from which they come. A portion of this multicultural education unit is designed to provide teachers, administrators, and children with information which will aid in refugee transition to the mode of life of the United States.

The Vietnamese information series was written principally by Mr. Liem Thanh Nguyen who, until April 1975 was Vice-Minister of Culture, Education, and Youth in Vietnam. (This position is equivalent to the Undersecretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the United States.) Having been trained in Vietnamese and French schools and universities and having had experience not only as a teacher, a principal, an educational specialist to the President of Vietnam, but also a representative of Vietnam in international educational conferences in Switzerland, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the United States, and in the United Nations, Mr. Liem brings a background of rich experience to the development of this series.

The educational materials here developed are referred to as the Southeast Asian Bilingual Education Information Series. The Bilingual Education Information Series (BEIS) consists of the following:

1. The Vietnamese Culture Kit. Culture kits are for adults and children and will help the teacher and other children in the class become better acquainted with the Vietnamese and other refugee children enrolled in the school district.
2. A Comparison of the Educational System and Curriculum of Vietnam and the United States. This comparison is a description of the Vietnamese educational system as it relates to the educational system of the United States.
3. Bilingual Phrase and Word Package for Practical Situations (two parts). The phrase and word packages are to aid teachers, adult educators, and employers in understanding and communicating with the Vietnamese. Words and phrases are used as an aid to students and adults in following the explanations. Practical situations are used; such as obtaining a job, community responsibilities, obtaining a driver's license, the family and marriage, and social institutions such as the school, church, and industry. These situations are written in both English and Vietnamese. The package includes:

a. Materials for adults which may help their maturity assist in the development and learning of their children.
b. Aids to assist students and adults in cultural and educational understandings.

William A. Hunter, Director
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FOREWORD

On April 25, 1975, by Memorandum to the Secretary of State, President Gerald R. Ford set forth the beginning of assistance for the relocation of South Vietnamese from South Vietnam. By Executive Order 11860, May 19, 1975, the framework and spirit of the relocation was placed in the historical and constitutional mold of the United States as follows:

> "Since the arrival of the first settlers on our eastern seaboard nearly 400 years ago, America has been a refuge for victims of persecution, intolerance and privations from around the world. Tide after tide of immigrants has settled here and added to our well-being as a nation.
>
> ---
>
> The arrival of thousands of refugees, mostly children, will require many adjustments on their part and considerable assistance on ours. But it is in our best interest as well as theirs to make this transition as gracious and efficient as humanly possible."

As of August 1975 of the more than 131,000 South Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, about 57,500 have been moved from resettlement camps to permanent homes in the United States. Immediately following these relocations, many American schools faced a new challenge in providing equal and adequate educational opportunities for an estimated 50,000 school-age refugees. Because refugee families are dispersed so widely around the United States, many teachers for the first time faced a new kind of bilingual educational development, that of non-English speaking Vietnamese speaking students in their classes.

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[1]Presidential Documents Title 3 - The President Executive Order 11860, May 19, 1975 - Establishing the President's Advisory Committee on Refugees. In Federal Register, Vol. 40, No. 99, Wednesday, May 21, 1975.

Besides the estimated 40,000 refugee children of elementary or high school age (6 to 17), another 10,000 to 20,000 were eligible to attend college.

After the resettlement of the Vietnamese refugees in the United States, it is important to help them adjust to the new environment and become members of a community. In this matter, education plays an important role including both formal and informal education.

For some time to come future assistance of one form or another will be required by all refugee students who need elementary, secondary and post-secondary education and adults who need to be helped in their adjustments.

One problem facing teachers of refugee students and prospective students is to find out what they have studied in Viet Nam or Cambodia or Thailand, to evaluate them and assist them in finding themselves in the American system of education as well as help them understand and work with their counterparts in American life.

A problem sponsors and advisors of adults will have is to find out about their backgrounds, their skills and potentials. With that knowledge it is possible, on one hand, to help master the English language so as to communicate and understand their new society, their duties and channels of utilizing their interests in being United States citizens; and, on the other hand, make use of their skills and potentials for their own benefit and that of the country as a whole.

The Vietnamese sponsorship program has served as the impetus for many Vietnamese refugees to relocate to Iowa as well as in other states. Although exact data in Iowa are unavailable, it is estimated that upward of 1,000 refugees have located or will be relocating in Iowa.

Many temporary programs have been instituted to aid the Vietnamese in their relocation, however, one of the most important and yet undefined programs has involved meeting the educational needs of the Vietnamese elementary, secondary, and adult education students.

Much confusion and concern has existed regarding the Vietnamese educational system, the integration of Vietnamese students into the United States' educational system, appropriate and informed administrative alternatives, teacher and pupil interaction, teacher sensitivity, short and long-range needs of Vietnamese students, and help from education agencies to deal with the problems attending these circumstances.

Iowa State University, through its Research Institute for Studies in Education (RISE) and its multicultural education program development has developed a model to aid in the implementation of strategies focusing on alleviating the problems associated with the adjustment of Vietnamese and other refugee children attending Iowa schools.

A strategy which may be used to implement use of the Vietnamese Culture Kit consists of three parts: Bilingual Education Information Dissemination (BEID), School In-Service Consultation and Adaptation (SISCA), and Research and Evaluation of Education Progress (REEP). This strategy will provide a basic course of action and data base for research to the State Department of Public Instruction, Area Education Agencies, local school districts, and research agencies seeking to provide and assess educational progress.

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INTRODUCTION

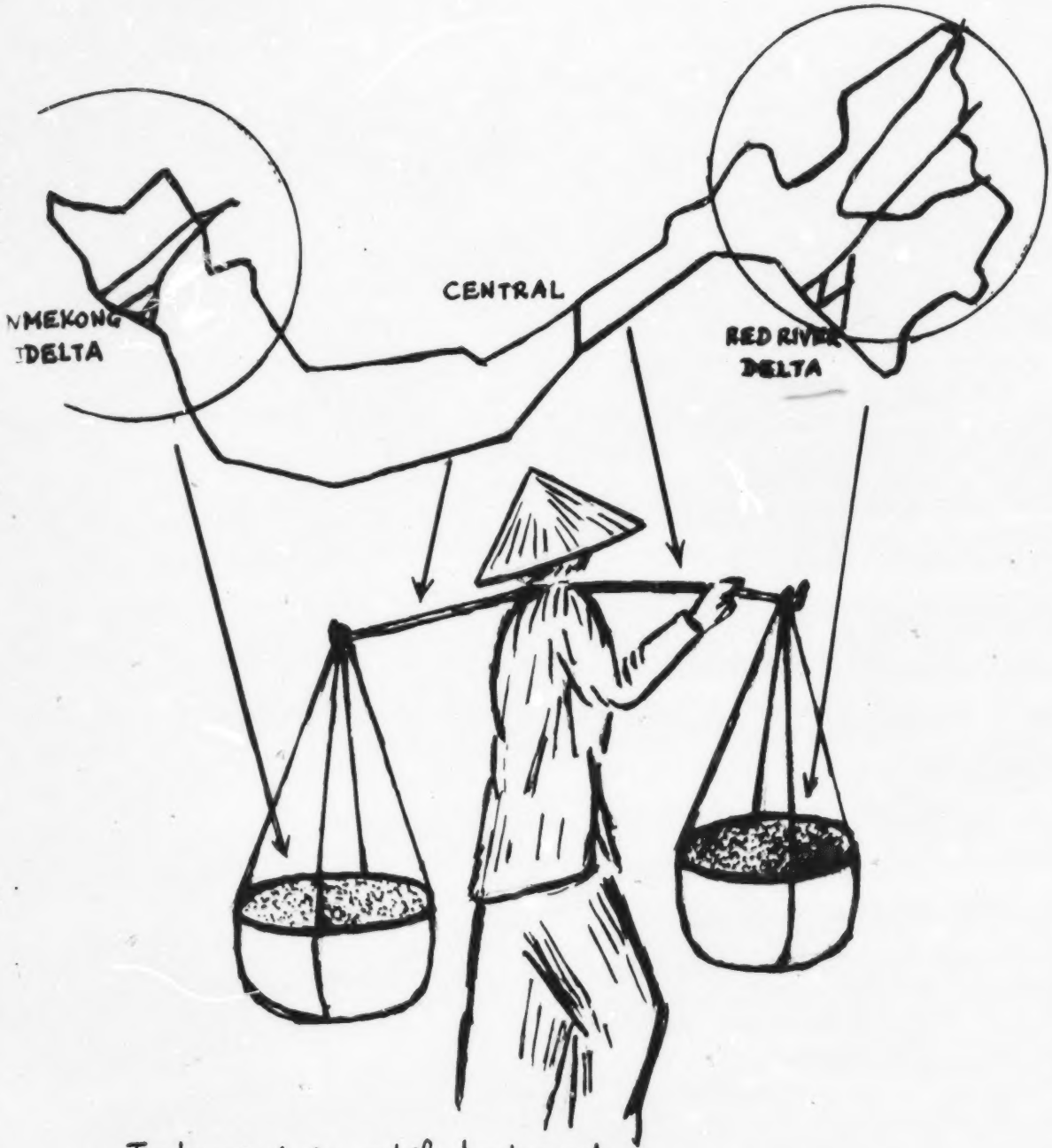
Many pages in the history of Southeast Asia record the significant influence on world affairs of events in the small divided country called Viet Nam.

During the period 1964-75 the United States played a direct role in the source of events in Viet Nam. On April 30, 1975, a new page was turned in the history of Southeast Asia, and the United States assumed a new role in providing refuge for Southeast Asians.

Viet Nam's geographical position in Southeast Asia can account, in part, for its historical importance. It is the gate to Indochina, Thailand, Burma, and the Southern border of China. It is the crosspoint of important communication axes and the melting pot of two great civilizations in Asia: Chinese and Indian. The term "Indochina" given to this penninsula by the Europeans, explains that salient feature.

Because of the important geographical position and the strategic location of Viet Nam, its people have had to struggle unceasingly to maintain their culture and survive physically. They struggled against Chinese dominations from their early settlement to the middle of the 19th century, as well as against the French domination from then to the end of World War II. Although dominated by the Chinese and the French, and therefore influenced by their civilizations, the Vietnamese people have tried hard to maintain the best characteristics of their own culture.

CHINA
BURMA
Red River
HANOI
LAOS
NORTH
VIET
NAM
GULF OF TONKING
HAINAN
17th parallel
HUE
THAILAND
Mekong
SOUTH
CHINA
SEA
SOUTH
VIET
NAM
CAMBODIA
GULF OF THAILAND
SAIGON
Mekong
INDOCHINA PENINSULA



Two baskets of rice and the bamboo pole.

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY OF VIETNAM

Geography

Viet Nam lies between parallels eight and twenty-three (latitude North) in the Northern hemisphere. It is bordered on the East by the South China Sea, on the North by China, on the West by Laos and Cambodia, and on the Southwest by the Gulf of Thailand.

The shape of the country is very much like the letter "S". The two large deltas in the North (the Red River Delta) and the South (the Mekong Delta) and the long narrow coastal strip of land of the Central part has been described pictorially as two baskets of rice hung from the two ends of the bamboo pole used by the Vietnamese peasant to carry his produce. The Red River Delta is the Vietnamese's first settlement, and the Mekong Delta is where the march to the South ended.

The climate is hot and humid all year around with two seasons: the rainy and the dry. It is the monsoon climate. The climate differs a little in different regions. In the South it is hot most of the year, only cooling off a little bit at the end of the lunar year (from December to February). The temperatures are between 72 degrees and 90 degrees Fahrenheit. The difference in temperature is greater in the Central and Northern parts of Viet Nam, but not as great as it is in the Midwest of the United States. The climate is always cool

in the highlands of Central Viet Nam because of its high altitude. There is no snow in Viet Nam, but heavy rains bring about storms and floods that often cause damage to the Northern and Central regions.

Two main resources and vital parts of the Vietnamese diet are rice and fish. Eighty percent of the population make their livings by farming or fishing. Tea, coffee, and rubber are other agricultural products. Delicious tropical fruits like mango, mangusteen, rambutein, papaya, bananas, etc., delight many foreign visitors. There are potential coal mines and minerals in the North and signs of oil mines offshore of the South.

According to the Geneva Agreement in 1954, Viet Nam was divided into two parts. The 17th parallel served as a demarcation line. To the North is North Viet Nam or the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam; to the South is South Viet Nam or the Republic of Viet Nam.

The total population was estimated 30 million in 1956, of which 17 million lived in North Viet Nam and 13 million in South Viet Nam. In 1975, the population of South Viet Nam is estimated at about 20 million.

The capital of North Viet Nam is Hanoi, and the capital of South Viet Nam is Saigon; the old capital, Hue, lying half way between Saigon and Hanoi belongs to South Viet Nam.

South Viet Nam, or the Republic of Viet Nam is politically and geographically divided into four (4) regions and one general headquarters.

- Region 1 consists of 5 coastal provinces in Central Viet Nam with the city of Danang as its headquarters.
- Region 2 consists of 6 provinces in the highlands and 5 provinces of the Southern part of Central Viet Nam with the city of Nha Trang as its headquarters.
- Region 3 consists of 8 provinces of the Eastern part of the South Viet Nam with Vien Hoa as its headquarters.
- Region 4 consists of 16 provinces in the Mekong Delta of the Southern part of Viet Nam with Can Tho as its headquarters.

The general headquarters are in Saigon and Gia Dinh.

History

The Vietnamese are a mixed people. The two constituent elements are Mongolian and Austro-Indonesian, according to recent ethnological findings. The country in its early era stretched from the Southern border of China to the Red River Valley. The verifiable history of Viet Nam began with a thousand years of Chinese domination from 111 B.C. to 939 A.D. During that period, Viet Nam was a Chinese province known as Giao Chi.

The Chinese domination for a thousand years had a strong influence on the Vietnamese civilization: language, written characters, religion, politics, and education. Most technical terms were borrowed from Chinese, known as Chinese-Vietnamese. Chinese characters were used in Viet Nam until the 19th century. The most important religions that have had profound influence on Vietnamese worship are Confucianism and Buddhism. The political system was modeled after Chinese patterns. As for education, most of the curriculum and textbooks were about Chinese literature and history, while examinations and the grading system were used exactly as they were in China.

The period from 939 to 1884 was the period of Nine Hundred Years of Independence and growth through six dynasties: Dinh, Le, Ly, Tran, Le, Nguyen. In this period the Vietnamese gradually expanded their territory southward and, at the end of the 18th century, set up their boundaries as they are now. Another important fact that characterized the Independence period was the creation of the Vietnamese characters known as "Chu Nom" and the composition of Vietnamese poetry making use of that new reform.

After the period of Independence came the period of French Domination from the middle of the 19th century through 1945. As soon as the French domination was founded, western civilization infiltrated and caused conflicts in the Confucianist society of Viet Nam. However, only the wealthy and educated people were deeply affected by the new civilization. The rest of the

nation was untouchable; thus, the traditional Chinese influence upon Vietnamese culture remained intact.

Two major reforms in education and literature in this period were the substitution of the rigid French system of education for the previous Chinese-Vietnamese system, and the use nationwide of the Romanized alphabet called "Guoc Ngu'", which had come into being a hundred years before. Many ancient Vietnamese masterpieces were transcribed into the Romanized alphabet, others were translated from the French. A new literature took shape, while secret political parties and resistance movements against the French domination increased gradually.

Viet Nam was declared independent after World War II, but the old French colonialists came back and wanted to dominate their old colony again. The resistance movement was organized in all parts of the country under the leadership of the Nationalist party and the Communist party. The war ended after the victory of the Communist army at Dien Bien Phu, with the Geneva agreement in 1954. Viet Nam was divided into two parts, with North Viet Nam under the Communist regime, and South Viet Nam under the regime of freedom. The war was ended and the French had withdrawn, but peace did not come. The conflict between opposing parties and the rapid growth of the Communist movement brought this country to another war which bore many names: "Cold War", "Ideological War", "War against the Communism for the South", and "War against the Capitalism for the North".

On April 30, 1975, the war finally ended with the complete victory of the Communists. The whole country has since been under Communist rule.

RELIGIONS AND SUPERSTITIONS

Religions

Before Catholicism was introduced to Viet Nam, the three religions that shaped the Vietnamese individual thinking and behavior were Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Among them, Taoism had the least influence and was gradually absorbed by Confucianism and Buddhism.

Confucianism is concerned more with politics and human ethics than religion, prasing such virtues as loyalty, filial piety, sincerity, kindness, and charity. A subject should be loyal to his emperor, a servant to his master, and a woman to her husband. In a Confucian society, great respect is given to man who is considered the keystone of the family. Yet Confucianism has as its aim the perfection of the individual. The ideal man should be a perfect man with all the virtues mentioned above. The bamboo tree is the symbol of this kind of perfect man, the traditional Chinese-Vietnamese gentleman. Because of its characteristic of remaining the same shape even when burnt, the bamboo tree represents nobleness, sincerity and fidelity.

Confucianism also had its religious element which strongly influenced the Vietnamese people, although most of them did not know what Confucianism was. The familiar name they called this religion was "the religion of ancestor worship", and, as the name indicates, within this religion, emphasis must be given to the cult of ancestors. The souls of the deceased are believed to be in the ancestral tablet on which the names of the dead are inscribed. Incense is burned daily before the ancestral tablet. Extremely important ceremonies are organized yearly in honor of ancestors, and foods are offered to the deceased on these occasions. The souls of the deceased are immortal and have magic power which can protect the living against disturbances and help the living seek peace and happiness.

Buddhism was first preached in Viet Nam by Chinese Buddhist monks around a thousand years ago. Buddhists believe in Buddha as their saviour, in the law of cause and effect and in the reincarnation of souls (imetempsychosis). One is born to this life with certain credits and debits from the previous life. Each person is responsible for his actions in this life which will establish his status in the next. This is the law of cause and effect or "Karma". Therefore, Buddhists are taught to do good deeds and pray to Buddha for their salvation and are supposed to practice vegetarianism regularly. Buddhist ceremonies are accompanied by tocsin and gongs; incense and candles might also be burned.

It is not easy to set Buddhists and Confucians apart because the two religions seem to be integrated in one. Both worship their ancestors and have altars for them in their houses. They offer food and drink to them in religious rites on the anniversary of their death and on the lunar new year.

The Vietnamese have the ability to synthesize many religions. Caodaism and Hoahaoism are Vietnamese religons which are a result of this kind of synthesis. The former came into being in the 19th century and has a great congregation in the eastern provinces of South Viet Nam, with its major beliefs based on Buddhism and Confucianism. In it, prophecies are often used. The latter religion took shape at the turn of this century and had its headquarters in the village of HoaHao, which became the name of the religion. Its sphere of influence is in the western part of the Mekong Delta. Its central beliefs are also based on Buddhism and Confucianism.

The Caodaists and the Hoahaoists have played an important role in the political scene as well as in the Viet Nam war.

In the cult of the dead, ceremonies which came down through the Confucian tradition mixed with others that had Buddhist origin. The great majority of the Vietnamese were influenced by these two systems. Some Vietnamese are likely to be polytheistic, having many divinities which do not belong to the major cults previously mentioned. In their houses, there are small altars for the worship of the God of Soil, the God of the Kitchen, the God of Wealth and many others. Others have the cult of

the national heroes who were supposed to become gods, and important ceremonies are organized yearly in honor of these heroes.

Catholicism is one of the major religions in Viet Nam. The earliest Catholic missionaries who came to Viet Nam in the 16th century were allowed to preach for a while, although after that, there was conflict between Christian and Confucianist views on the relation of the individual to the state. Moreover, there were suspicions among Vietnamese statesmen about foreign missionaries. Therefore, for political and moral reasons, the Vietnamese government did not permit the Catholic Church to function freely. Some missionaries were deported and some native leaders were persecuted. However, the Catholic communities in Viet Nam were not extinguished. In the period of French domination, they grew up rapidly and became very important and influential in the country.

Superstitions

The less-educated Vietnamese are superstitious.

They believe that some gods, when angry, can punish wrongdoers by spreading diseases or epidemics. In this case, they offer food and drinks to the avenging gods through the help of a magician to ask for foregiveness. The Vietnamese peasants believe that there are many demons wandering in remote areas, in the big trees, in wild spots, or in the cemeteries. These demons are supposed to cause evil things to mankind, such as

illness, bad luck, disaster, etc. The magician possesses magic power over the demons, and thus, the Vietnamese peasants need the magician to protect them against the demons.

On All Souls' Day (the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the lunar year), some Vietnamese make a big offering of food and drink to their ancestors as well as to wandering souls. Buddhist monks are asked to come to pray for all souls at this religious ceremony, which ends with the burning of paper clothes and imitation paper money. They believe that in the other world the dead can make use of the paper clothes and imitation paper money burned for them.

Many Vietnamese, educated and illiterate as well, are fatalists. They believe that man's destiny is predetermined by God and that man is born under a star that can be good or bad. No one can do anything to change his destiny but to pray and act according to God's will. Therefore, before making an important decision or when in trouble, many Vietnamese consult astrology for advice. Astrology (a kind of fortune-telling) is a pseudo-science that fortells the future by studying the supposed influence of the relative positions of the sun, the moon and stars on human affairs.

Good signs bring good luck while bad signs forecast bad luck. These signs are especially important on the first day of the lunar year, called TET. Tet is the time for religious rites, family reunions, exchanging wishes and gifts, paying all debts, correcting all faults, forgetting past misfortunes and looking

forward to the future with hope. The Tet day represents the whole year; thus, good signs on this peculiar day forecast a whole year of good luck and bad signs a whole year of bad luck.

Red is the favorite color for this occasion because it represents good luck, happiness and prosperity. People wear a happy look on their faces with the hope that good luck and happiness will smile back to them. A visit from a person whose name means prosperity, happiness or longevity on Tet is a good sign. Conversely, it is considered a bad sign if the name of the visitor has the meaning of something not good. The breaking of a cup, a dish, a chopstick, etc., on the first day of the New Year (Tet) is a bad sign.

Below are some other good and bad signs in the daily life of the Vietnamese:

Good signs

- Seeing a funeral.
- Having a number, whose total equal to nine or has the number nine at the end. (For example, the number of a car - 6544, the number of a telephone - 38323. In these cases, the total number of the car is 6 + 5 + 4 + 4 = 19, and the total number of the telephone is 3 + 8 + 3 + 2 + 3 = 19)

Bad Signs

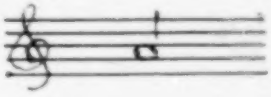
- 3 people setting off on a trip.
- 3 people having a picture taken.

- The 5th, 14th, 23rd days of a lunar month are bad days.
- Having a number, whose total has a 0 at the end.

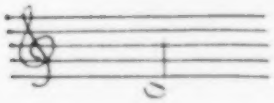
LANGUAGE

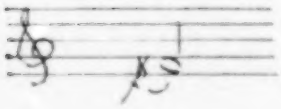
The Vietnamese national language is Vietnamese. It varies slightly in tones in three parts of Viet Nam: Northern, Central, and Southern.

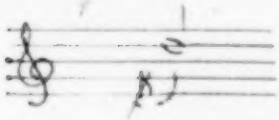
These are its six tones on a musical scale:

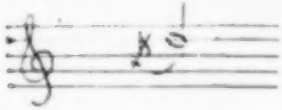
1. MA  (ghost)

2. MÁ (mother)

3. MÀ  (but, that)

4. MẠ  (young rice)

5. MẢ  (grave)

6. MÃ  (horse)

In the previous examples, the tones have a lexical function that can give one word six different meanings.

Vietnamese is monosyllabic. Each word has its unique syllable and therefore allows no derivations. It is invariable. For example:

di	(go)
no di	(He goes)
no di hoi hom qua	(He went yesterday)

Its romanized alphabet and the close relationship between its spelling system and pronunciation facilitate the learning of Vietnamese, although its tones may cause some difficulties to non-native speakers at the very start.

Below are some characteristics of the syntax.

1. The subject is always before the verb, even in questions.

Ex.: Anh di không? = You go not?
S V meaning, you go or not go?

Tôi không di. = I don't go.
S V

2. The word which determines is after the word which is determined. So the adjective comes after the noun.

Ex.: cây xanh = Tree green
N Adj.

The Adverb comes after the verb.

Ex.: Tôi di chậm. = I go slowly.
V Adv.

3. Verbs in Vietnamese have no tenses. Time phrases like yesterday, tomorrow, now, yet . . . are added to denote time.

Ex.: Tôi di bây giờ dây = I go now.
Tôi di hồi hôm qua = I go yesterday.
Ngày mai tôi di = Tomorrow I go.

VIETNAMESE CUSTOMS

HINTS TO DEAL WITH CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The fast pace and hard work of American life bewilder most Vietnamese. They know the United States through Hollywood movies and American GIs; beautiful clothes, spacious, comfortable houses, luxurious cars, and the generous way of spending money. Therefore, they are frustrated when they see everybody working hard and always in a rush. Some start to miss the easy and simple life they had in Viet Nam where they could take time in doing things and did not have to work so hard.

The high cost of labor is also a great shock to many Vietnamese who are used to having a maid and having things done for them. Even the middle class could afford to have maids in their houses. They now have to learn to work in the house, doing all the cooking, cleaning and fixing themselves.

Many Vietnamese are not familiar with the "Dutch Treat" practice in the United States, and sometimes are not prepared for that. When a Vietnamese invites you to eat out with him, you may securely assume that he will take care of your bill.

The Vietnamese are reserved and bashful, and therefore, are not as outspoken and forward as Americans. They are so considerate of other people's feelings that they lack directness. They beat around the bush instead of tackling the subject directly. Refusals are hard for the Vietnamese to make. Therefore, a "yes" or a nod of one's head does not always mean agreement or acceptance. They say what they think people would like to hear rather than what they feel. On the other hand, a "no" does not necessarily mean a refusal. For example, they would say "No, thank you" when being offered food or drink at least twice before they could graciously say "yes".

It is suggested that you jot down on a piece of paper the important things you want Vietnamese to remember: names, places, time, telephone numbers. . . or ask them to repeat what you say to make sure they understand your instructions. Tell them it is not impolite to say "no" when they do not understand or do not agree. Remind them it is neither childish nor cheap to accept food or drinks when they are offered. You may use the third party to find out the truth or to tell them something unpleasant.

Because of their feeling of humbleness, the Vietnamese are reluctant to accept praise. They are embarrassed when congratulated and tend to reject your appraisal. You may want to tell them that a smile and a note of thanks are appropriate for this situation.

Since the Vietnamese are taught not to let people read their feelings from their facial appearance, they often use their smile as a polite screen. They smile to show friendliness, happiness, politeness, generosity, foregiveness, but they also smile to conceal their frustration, desperation, ignorance, bitterness, embarrassment, scorn or anger.

When given a gift, the Vietnamese express their thanks to you, but do not open it in your presence and will make no mention of it again. In so doing, they think they appreciate your friendly act and consideration more than your material gift.

The Vietnamese respect age, social ranks and education. Age and education to them denote wisdom and maturity, while social ranks mean honor and prestige. A person is expected to hand things to his elders with both of his hands and stand up to greet his teacher or his boss. This is also reflected in the way young people address their elders. An engineer is called "Engineer Tam" instead of Mr. Tam. If a person is the second member in a family of five children, he is called "brother two" by his younger brothers and sisters or "uncle two" by his nephews and nieces.

The majority of the Vietnamese people are influenced by Confucianism. The family is very important and its ties are very strong in Asian society. When a Vietnamese mentions "his family" he does not only mean his wife and children, but he also includes his parents, brothers and sisters. When a man does something, he does it out of his family consideration rather than for himself as an individual. The eldest brother in a family may cancel his marriage because he has to take over the duty of his departed father to raise and educate his younger brothers and sisters. For the welfare and happiness of her children a woman may suffer in silence but refuse to think of a divorce.

The importance of the Vietnamese family can be seen in the order of a person's name:

Nguyễn	Văn	Tâm
(Family name)	(Middle name)	(Given name)

The Vietnamese call themselves by their given names. Let's take the above-mentioned example. We call him Mr. Tâm and his friends call him Tâm.

In American terms, a Vietnamese name would appear illogical because the first name comes at the end while the last name comes at the beginning.

The reverse order of a Vietnamese name may cause confusion and so may the way a married woman is called. Her official documents carry her maiden name, while in every day life she may be called by her first name, Mrs. Lan or her husband's first name Mrs. Tâm.

Most, if not all, Vietnamese worship their ancestors and believe that the spirits of the dead dwell on the altar in their houses or on their heads. So, the head to the Vietnamese is a sacred place. They offer food and drinks to their ancestors on the anniversary of their death and on the first day of the lunar new year in religious rites.

The felt presence of departed ancestors and close relatives strengthens the family ties and encourages young widows and widowers to fulfill their duties. The Vietnamese open their home to members of their families and lend money to them without talking of repayment or setting a time limit. It is usually understood that the money will be repaid if and when possible. Personal honor is involved in such arrangements, and unpaid debts are rare in Viet Nam.

A middle-sized house in Viet Nam can accommodate three generations. The Vietnamese do not value privacy the way the Americans do.

The slow pace of life in Viet Nam is reflected in the fact that the Vietnamese are slow in acting and reacting. Their concept of time is compared to a rubber band which can stretch and contract easily. They, therefore, are often late for appointments.

It is suggested that you tell them that punctuality is very important and business appointments should always be kept promptly.

Things have changed drastically these days in Viet Nam, but the teacher-student relationship remains unchanged. Vietnamese students have great esteem and respect for their teacher. They think it is not polite to call him by his first name. So, do not feel upset if they address you: "Teacher", "Mr. Principal", "Mr. Superintendent". They stand up to greet their teacher whenever they see him and never talk back to him. They have so much confidence in their teacher that they tend to take for granted whatever he says. Because of their shyness, self-consciousness and their concepts of honor and dignity, they are reluctant to express their ideas and feelings for fear of making mistakes. They rarely volunteer to speak in class or ask for help unless encouraged to do so. The formality of a classroom in Viet Nam sets the teacher on the platform giving lectures, instructions, and assignments. Students are expected to listen to their teacher and do the assignments given to them. They may be at a loss if they are asked to do research on their own. What they need is step-by-step instructions and guidance.

The often-mentioned attitude of respect for others carries over linguistic features. Their concern is not so much for the nature of questions as it is for whether or not they can agree with the inquirer. This often causes confusion, especially with negative questions and tag ending questions.

Example:

American: Don't you like coffee?

Vietnamese: Yes. (Meaning: Yes, you're right. I don't like coffee).

American: You aren't going, are you?

Vietnamese: Yes. (Meaning: Yes, you're right. I'm not going.)

American: I don't like cold weather.

Vietnamese: Me, too. (Meaning: I agree with you. I don't like cold weather.)

"Would you mind opening the door?" and "Would you please open the door?" have the same meaning to many Vietnamese. They might respond to "Would you mind opening the door?" with "Yes." then quickly open the door for you.

Vietnamese Feasts and Holidays

Vietnamese feasts and holidays are either Confucian, Buddhistic, or Catholic. Others are commemorative or observed in honor of a military genius. All are observed in accordance with the dates on the lunar calendar. The most important holidays are:

Tet, the lunar New Year

Tet Duong lich, the solar New Year

The Thanh Minh, or visit to the cemetery in the third month

Birthday of Buddha, on the 15th of the fourth month

The Trung Nguyen, or All Souls Day, on the 15th of the seventh month

The Mid-Autumn Festival, also called Tet for children

Noel, or Christmas

Other feasts are observed to commemorate the victories of national heroes:

The Battle of Dong Da, or victory of Emperor Quang Trung, on the 6th of the 1st month

The victories of the two heroines, Sisters Trung, on the 6th of the second month

The victories of Marshal Tran Hung Dao, on the 20th day of the eighth month

The most important of these holidays is the Tet or New Years Day, which is a mobile feast corresponding to the new moon and taking place between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. It lasts, in accordance with old tradition, one month as it is populary said: January is the month for rest and amusement. But nowadays people stop working and doing business for only three and one-half days.

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